

Commissioner's Decision and Order
The Hope High School Complex:
Final Report

Presented to Commissioner Peter McWalters
By
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This is the final report by Special Master Nicholas C. Donohue concerning the status of Hope High School and recommendations for continued monitoring and support. This report differs from previous reports in that it focuses on the future. The emphasis is on what needs to happen from here on to secure and enhance improvements at Hope.

Progress made over the summer and since the beginning of this school year has been substantial. However, rather than reviewing every aspect of the Order in the format of previous Progress Reports, this report will highlight some areas of particular progress achieved over the summer and into the beginning of this school year, as well as some areas of remaining concern.

The report includes priority recommendations to support continued monitoring and assistance at the school level. There is also a significant focus on issues related to district capacity. The importance of cogent, effective district systems can not be overstated as it relates to continued and sustained improvement of Hope High School.

Finally, comments and recommendations are made regarding state support and related state level policy issues.

The report is presented in eight parts.

- Introduction and Overview
- Background
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Introduction and Overview

Over the past eighteen months progress at Hope has been enormous. All four Areas of Compliance have seen sustained improvement – Three Small Learning Communities, Professionalism, Personalization and Active Parents/Engaged Community.

Naturally, progress has varied among these four areas. There is a growing sense of identity within the Arts, Leadership and Information Technology SLCs. Thematic approaches defining these three is emerging as well. The staff has responded heroically. The three lead administrators have handled a Herculean effort well and continue to learn and grow. Students demonstrate seriousness about school and a sense of belonging necessary to achieve success. Moving to a truly “personalized” approach to teaching and learning is a long-term task, as are many of the desired improvements at Hope. The introduction of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) has been a pivotal, initial step toward this goal. While parent participation is lower than most would like, the creation of deep, meaningful community partnerships with a number of local institutions of higher education has exceeded expectations. Most importantly, there is real focus on instructional improvement – reflecting on and changing teaching and learning at Hope.

The last Progress Report (June 2006) categorized progress toward compliance with elements of the Order as “satisfactory.” While based on a specific set of operational goals and objectives, by any reasonable measure progress overall at Hope is excellent.

It is extremely likely that the school will succeed in achieving the specifics of the Order over time. It is also likely that Hope will achieve an “above average” comparison to other Providence High Schools. The immediate challenge is to maintain and accelerate the pace of change and improvement to ensure these sorts of outcomes.

In order to achieve this, work must continue at Hope. However, at this time the capacity of district operations, leadership and the continued and expanded commitment of the state are essential. Sustaining the improvements under way at Hope depends on new levels of activity, risk and courage on the part of the people at Hope, in the district office and at the state level.

The future is bright at Hope, but efforts must be increased and refocused to secure long term, broad school success at the school. Meeting these challenges will simultaneously assist in laying the groundwork for improved student outcomes throughout Providence.

Background

Eighteen months ago Commissioner Peter McWalters took the bold step of delivering the Hope Decision and Order. The strategies for improvement at Hope included a variety of general and specific steps. One of the central aspects of the Commissioner's Order was the placement of a Special Master at Hope. Invested with the authority of the Commissioner's office, this position was intended to "monitor and facilitate" the prescriptions embedded in the Order and to take the steps necessary to ensure progress at Hope.

After the delivery of the Order, the remaining few months of the 2004-2005 school year were spent on the introduction of a new Hope leadership team comprised of three new principals who did not take over operational responsibility until the close of the school year. The hiring of fifty-four new staff, the finalization of summer professional development plans and the establishment of relations with community based organizations consumed most of the late spring. The summer of 2005 saw strong attendance at district led professional learning sessions.

The establishment of an orderly learning environment at Hope characterized the beginning of school year 2005-2006. Clear, firm expectations for student and staff behavior were communicated to all parties. Eventually, a cogent yearlong professional development plan emerged. This plan focused on consistency of effort among the staff in terms of the creation of unit plans, lesson plans, the review and grading of student work.

For too long, the chaos at Hope had resulted in too wide a variety of criteria for determining quality work. In the past, each teacher, left to their own devices, or on occasion small groups of staff, had to decide what was "good enough." It was through these efforts last year, that common understandings of expectations grew. Advisories were established as well. Slow to start, hard to implement, ILPs embedded in the process, finally small groups of students and staff began to meet, get to know each other and begin the eradication of anonymity at Hope.

Last year saw the successful negotiation of substantive Memorandums of Understanding with Johnson & Wales, Rhode Island College, Rhode Island School of Design, Roger Williams and Brown University. Unlike many partnerships that provide gratuitous affiliations that may look good, these agreements serve the interests of Hope and the contributing institutions. It is the "two way" nature of these arrangements that makes them meaningful and sustainable.

Assistance with course design, rigor, access to higher education credits, high-quality after school opportunities for Hope students, classes for Hope parents and staff and maybe most importantly the consistent, challenging perspective of real world professionals are just some of the benefits that these partnerships bring to Hope.

The emergence of a strong group of Teacher Leaders at Hope made a huge difference. This group of dedicated and skilled professionals, with the time to work together and with sufficient training, have become a core leadership asset at Hope.

School Site Councils began to meet last year. Parent events were organized. School spirit increased, driven by a focus on facets of school life unattended for too long such as student performances in sports and other extra-curricular activities. It was the combination of renewed staff enthusiasm, supported by leadership and welcomed by students that led to this renaissance of school spirit.

Over the course of year, it was necessary to adjust some of the original, particular aspects of the Order. Guided by a principle balancing immediate improvements at Hope with a parallel goal of maintaining high expectations for district leadership at Hope, there were times when decisions were made modifying timelines based on whether or not district initiatives seemed able to deliver particular improvements.

For example, the district is moving toward full-scale implementation of Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) district-wide. However, it was the determination of the Special Master that ILPs needed to be implemented at Hope immediately and that they not wait until the following year when district plans were scheduled for implementation.

On the other hand, the Order demands the development of a peer-based teacher evaluation system. In this case, the timelines were extended so that district plans to pilot this kind of system could lead the way. This meant delaying implementation until this year and in fact, the process is to be piloted at Hope for the system as whole. These and other allowances over the past year or more were deemed necessary and have contributed to the overall progress at Hope.

Further adjustments will inevitably need to be made through the next evolution of monitoring and support mechanisms established by the state for Hope and the Providence School District. Whatever the nature of these mechanisms, the next section of this report outlines school-based priorities for monitoring and support.

Priorities at Hope

The following were identified in Progress Report #3 as areas that would demand greater attention in the year to come.

- ✓ Attendance
- ✓ Parent Involvement
- ✓ Individual Learning Plans
- ✓ Instruction
- ✓ Distributed Leadership and Professional Culture
- ✓ Staff Supervision and Evaluation Systems.

Attendance

Students need to be in school to succeed in school. Averages at Hope meet or exceed district averages. This is not good enough. A deeper review of the data will show that rather than some 20% of students not attending at all, that the 80% attendance rate is a phenomenon of a larger percentage of students attending “part time.” If it continues this pattern that will make it impossible for Hope to achieve sustained success even at modest levels. Too many students are still missing too much school.

There are significant steps being taken. There is a shared understanding of the scope and seriousness of the issue among staff. Clear expectations are in place. There are some focused supports available for chronically absent students. Home visits are taking place involving a few, well-skilled staff. This summer a small group of staff met on the issue. There is a standing, cross complex team that addresses this and other high priority issues.

Parent Involvement

Significant improvements have been made in this area as well. The return rates on the RIDE SALT Survey have increased more than ten fold. The results of these surveys are promising. There is an active PTO emerging. A dedicated staff person is at work focusing on community and parent engagement. There are real efforts to engage parents and families in a variety of school activities. More needs to be done.

The future, dramatic success at Hope will depend in large part to building greater ownership on the parts of families. Dozens of parents attend meetings today; hundreds must become more engaged through a variety of ways.

Individual Learning Plans

ILPs are taking root at Hope. The most salient and obvious artifacts of a personalized system, these plans are articulations of student goals and the strategies to achieve the successful futures of each and every Hope student.

There are important, planned next steps to grow and nurture this process. There remain essential next steps that must be addressed. Greater parent understanding of these efforts, deeper community participation and higher and higher expectations must drive the outcomes.

Instruction

There is a true focus on instructional improvement moving ahead at Hope. This is the core issue in terms of moving student achievement forward. Building common, high expectations regarding student outcomes is occurring. Reflection on current practices is growing.

In order to reach the highest levels of student success and a number of additional thresholds must be met. First, a deeper definition, integration and commitment to the three thematic stands at Hope – Arts, IT and Leadership – must occur. These themes must be paramount as the school-improvement effort in each of the Hope academies moves forward. This means that at every opportunity course work will be reworked to evidence rich, thematic content delivered in real world contexts in partnership with relevant community resources.

Work is headed in this direction and it needs help to accelerate and take root in ways that will sustain its development and growth.

Distributed Leadership and Professional Culture

The school's initial success depended on the determination of leadership and staff. People worked hard and dramatic improvements came. At this time the need for broader circle of leaders defined by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and trust is essential. The responsibility for this kind of climate and culture is shared with the greater burden on the senior leadership at the school and within the district office.

There is a real commitment to moving in this direction. A shared leadership team meets regularly each week to address specific issues. A strong Teacher Leader group is driving professional learning. A semester long leadership seminar is scheduled for key staff.

The [ek cut ref to Joint L. Team] leadership team at Hope should be commended for building a culture that is focused on teaching and learning.

In particular, the teachers' union showed true leadership and commitment in suspending some of its rules to allow for new staffing provisions. The union leaders showed that they are serious about teaching and learning. There is evidence that the labor-relations approach pioneered at Hope has been successful, and the union and District should expand these principles and apply them at other schools in need of improvement.

Staff Supervision and Evaluation Systems

Clear, high expectations for staff performance coupled with strong support systems and reasonable consequences are essential for continued and accelerated success at Hope. The district at Hope is piloting a peer-based teacher evaluation system this year. There are emerging district expectations for clearer articulated expectations concerning school-based leadership as well.

In addition to these official systems, greater time and attention must be spent on the part of the lead administrators in challenging and growing the skills and knowledge of key staff. This is the most important and difficult task of any manager. It will demand support and training of all involved.

Recommendations For Hope

These recommendation address Hope specifics and include suggestions for District activities and capacity building as well. Continued success at Hope will be driven by increased and improved capacity at the district office.

The Commissioner must continue to monitor the ongoing implementation of his Corrective Action Order by assigning a staff member to have direct responsibility as his liaison to Hope. And the state must continue to focus efforts at the District Level so as to ensure the continued investment in the success of Hope and other secondary schools in the District.

Attendance, Parent Involvement and Individual Learning Plans

The Order described faculty advisors as a primary link to families. This role must be enhanced immediately. Beginning with a volunteer core, specific challenges should be made to those staff willing to immediately reach out and build relationships with the parents of these advisors students. Communication concerning Individual Learning Plans would be the vehicle for this kind of communication effort. As described above significant and positive steps have been taken at Hope this year and more must be done.

Each and every parent and/or guardian should have a fully informed and aggressive opportunity to understand and participate in this process. The issue of awareness about and participation in developing, monitoring and fulfilling these plans should be a n expectation on the same level as expecting that student fulfill homework requirements and come to school.

The challenge might take the form of a two month window during which each advisor commits to reaching and building a basic beginning relationship with 95% of the parents/guardians if their advisees. During this time, these volunteers would have access

to a fund of money drawn from unspent resources designated in the current District Negotiated Agreement for their use in getting this job done.

After that window close, the lessons learned at Hope should be translated into a clear, simple professional development program designed by district professional development leaders with state technical assistance. This “program” would then be made available to all other staff.

Beginning in the summer of 2007, an expectation that all staff reach all Hope families in some similar fashion should be enforced in full. The agreement to work at Hope includes a commitment to do what it takes to accomplish this kind of improvement. Beginning immediately – with state support - the district should take over benchmarking and monitoring responsibilities for this effort.

Instruction

This is the core issue at any school. Good work is being done. This must continue. Building on current activities, the clear development of thematic approaches to learning should be a top priority.

All three Small Learning Communities within the Hope complex should participate in a customized SALT visit that focuses on these and other priority areas defined in the Order. NEASC accreditation processes are already underway and are aligned with desired Hope outcomes. This relationship should be reinforced by explicit agreement between the state, district, Hope and NEASC leadership.

The roles of Teacher Leaders at Hope must be supported fully. It has been more than a year since a Senior Teacher Leader position was agreed on by district leadership to address self-identified needs. This position must be filled immediately or resources should be withheld from the district by the state.

Distributed Leadership and Professional Culture

This is another area in which progress has been made and more must be done. The initial success of the school was largely due to the strong will of the lead administrators supported by staff. The complexity of the next level of activities at Hope in terms of teaching and learning demand a wider circle of leaders at Hope with related institutional structures.

The existing Complex Leadership should be formalized and trained in group process decision-making; benchmarking and other shared decision-making skills. Likewise, existing SIT chairs and parent participants should each receive customized training this year to build on the nominal support provided in the past.

The district office with the direct support of the RIDE Progressive Support and Intervention Office should design and provide this support this coming winter and spring.

Staff Supervision and Evaluation Systems

The state must continue to monitor and support the district effort to create a meaningful peer-based evaluation system. This system is presumably being piloted at Hope this year. Recent progress on this effort has been delayed and slow. It should be a deliberate and thoughtful process, but it must move ahead and it must be in place next year in full at Hope. This will take assistance to accelerate the process.

Other Issues

Two additional issues that stand alone as distinct and disruptive are:

The persistent tide of new students into Hope. Either the practice should be discontinued or resources made available for the integration of new students.

The degradation of facilities and slow response to technology needs. The facilities are in slow decline, unsafe in some ways and efforts to improve them too slow.

District Capacity

The current aspirations of the PPSD are bold and correct. There is a right emphasis on school-based reform aiming at strong student outcomes. There is an avowed commitment to building capacity at the school level to create local communities of excellence to help achieve this end.

The district office is staffed with good people. There is leadership with vision, strong operational oversight with deep knowledge of schools, committed staff and real desire to deliver high-quality school-based support and to grow an aligned system of rigorous accountability.

Even with a good core group of people and correct ideas, however, there is a critical missing piece to any successful formula – enough capacity focused on the right kind of activities and the process opportunity to change the way the district office does its business. These are two inter-related issues that must be addressed to sustain and enhance the success at Hope and to support feasible improvement district-wide.

Efficiency and a good match between staff skills and organizational mission are key factors to improving effectiveness. There is room to grow in both these areas for the PPSD. However, no improvement in these areas will attend to the scope of work available in terms of helping schools move forward.

And while schools should certainly be challenged to build capacity, the nature and depth of the skills needed to manage school-based change can never lie solely with school staff. Education reform has often been compared to “building the plane while flying it.” Even in this dramatic analogy, no one can imagine success at this fantastical effort through the

efforts of flight attendants and pilots alone. One would need skilled, experienced engineers and other professionals some of whom know little of actually flying. Likewise in schools there is a large volume of work that must be done to support school based work. While school staff should be familiar with this work, people outside of the school have an essential role in providing support, expertise and leadership.

Data analysis, best-practice research, and process facilitation are three examples of activities at which school staff should certainly attain some level of proficiency. However, the lead work on these areas should be provided by intermediary support systems – such as district offices.

For example, if it is expected that staff use data to make high stakes programmatic decisions then they should certainly learn something about analyzing data themselves. However, there is also a need for accessible, expert assistance with this kind of effort. The depth of knowledge necessary for the kind of analysis necessary to be truly useful is deep and complicated. It is a job in itself.

This example is an interesting one as it actually represents a successful effort on the part of the district to engage an expert outsourced organization. The help provided by CRM a company dedicated to databased school reform assistance has been invaluable at Hope High this past year.

It is, thus, possible to provide some of this work through outsourcing. However, at the larger scale implied for urban school reform, cost effectiveness will be driven by building in-house capacity within the district. The expenses of simply expending on consultant organizations are prohibitive and unnecessary. With the correct incentives, it is possible to attract expertise and provide for a reasonable per unit basis. [ek add next sent] Leadership development and supervision of the staff are vital to school improvement.

Hand-in-hand with the basic depth of competency comes a shift in approaches to work. With a thin staff capacity, it is almost inevitable that systems such as the PPSD reinforce a compliance driven system – making sure rules are followed and directives followed. In order to shift toward a more productive approach that balances these essential accountability components to one that also includes some technical assistance and capacity building strengths, there needs to be a well facilitated process that leads a cultural change within the district organization. This process opportunity is critical to making sure any enhanced capacity is well used.

This kind of organizational change effort is often defined as creating a “learning community” – a place where continuous improvement occurs through reflection on practice, customer feedback and learning from mistakes. [ek add next sent] The district must continue to use data, listen to its stakeholders, reflect on the data and information that is available, set goals, determine soft and hard indicators, monitor progress, make changes, and review its process of school improvement. Developing this kind of activity at the district level is critical to enhance the PPSD’s capacity to lead real reform and it models an approach to improvement that schools must adopt to succeed.

No one should ever apologize for incompetence. High expectations should pervade any system from “top to bottom.” And there are many areas where current PPSD operations can and must improve without additional resources. However, it is both unfair and counterproductive to try to hold people accountable to a more complicated and important mission, when it is obvious the task exceeds resources available. And while investing in bureaucracy may not be a popular decision [ek add next phrase] and can never in and of itself ensure school improvement, with a system that falls well below national averages for systems its size in terms of district capacity, the choices are slim.

Without enhanced capacity in the form of additional resources, a good organization change process, and a strong accountability system to make sure resources are used well, the PPSD will be left to attend to its most basic responsibilities – overseeing compliance and distributing resources. This in turn will leave the Providence schools – and Hope – to fend for itself and struggle with the district office rather than learn from it.

On the school side it will continue to seem like their initiatives are thwarted by slow or rigid responses. From the district school-level efforts will continue to look reckless or self-serving at the expense of longer term, broader strategies, rather than as the best efforts of people desperate for assistance.

The District, therefore, needs to:

- Ramp up reform efforts at Hope (and other secondary schools) by continuing to build district capacity to provide effective leadership to align all school-improvement systems and initiatives.
- Take advantage of the lessons learned from Hope to work collaboratively with the teachers’ union to improve teaching and learning throughout the District

State Level Issues

Schools are part of various “systems.” They are a system in their own right – students and staff. A broader system includes family and community. The district defines a larger system of education still. And the state and federal governments define still larger orbits.

The state must translate the lessons learned from Hope and apply them to other schools. In order to achieve this “scaling- up” of success, deep, system-wide improvements are needed. [ek rest of para.]

In the case of Hope and the rest of Providence, the state policies play a seminal role. Most of the news is very positive. Rhode Island has a strong, forward thinking set of high school regulations that are a model for many other states. RIDE provides effective leadership and support, but wisely measures out the assistance offered in terms of the resources it has.

Experiences at Hope point to other state level issues that either have had an impact or could if addressed. The Regents High School Regulations are the most obvious. Demanding stronger performance in literacy, deeper personalization of student and a wider variety of ways of measuring student success, these state rules have complemented and at times driven reform efforts at Hope.

Likewise, the expectation that common planning time be provided for professional activities has been critical to Hope's success. While still refining how it uses its time – and thirsting for greater district leadership in this area – the school has significant time available for professional collaboration.

The emerging work on different “pathways” for high school students to find their way to higher education holds great promise as long as they all lead to college ready outcomes. The differentiation of learning experiences needed to accelerate learning outcomes demands a variety of approaches. Authentic, real world opportunities, internships, apprenticeships, dual and early enrollment, mentoring and more “other than classroom” experiences are essential. State policies allowing flexibility will contribute to these ends if it develops appropriately and fast enough.

One of the most pivotal events at Hope came soon after the Commissioner's Decision and Order was delivered. There was an almost immediate need to hire almost exactly one half of the staff of one hundred and eight. Facing this daunting task late in the hiring season and knowing that a fresh start would mean so much to the schools eventual progress, a decision was made to allow hiring at the school without regard to seniority.

In educational politics there are a few more volatile issues.

The success of efforts at Hope rests in part on a respectful and fierce relationship between union and management. Giving and taking, protecting and demanding, arguing and reconciling have all characterized this partnership. Credit must go to both union and management leadership.

It has not all been easy, however any effort to move ahead and through the archaic employment structure that hampers improvement today is essential for continued success at Hope and any efforts to disseminate lessons to other school communities. This analysis amounts to an strong endorsement of changing hiring practices, moving away from the current static models, toward more fluid, performance based approaches without slipping unwisely into a “merit pay” approach or allowing the corruption of workers rights evidenced in past generations.

There are other leverage points that must be addressed to lead real improvement. One of the great things at Hope is the depth and breadth of community involvement between the Small Learning Communities at Hope and higher education partners. As mentioned earlier, Johnson & Wales, RISD, and Rhode Island College and to lesser but still important ways, Roger Williams and Brown University, have all contributed to success in pivotal, essential ways.

Paving the way for more of these kinds of partnerships will eventually demand an investment on the higher education side to counterbalance the in-kind contributions being made today. It will be impossible to multiply efforts made at Hope without someone paying some part of the bill. Continuing efforts at Hope do attend to some reasonable self-interest of the partners, but there are concerns that over time maintaining the high levels of commitment established today will be difficult.

It seems plain that decisions that Rhode Island faces concerning the balance of school funding between urban, poorer districts and wealthier suburban districts will determine the future success of the states educational system over all.

Maintaining an inequitable distribution of basic per pupil costs based on local, state, and federal dollars that characterizes the current situation will maintain current differentials in outcomes. [ek ad] Equity is necessary, but so is adequacy – enough aid for all districts to get the work done. One gets what they pay for.

The increases necessary for Hope's recent success have been relatively nominal, amounting to the low single digits in terms of the total school budget. If we were to add some reasonable investment in the district office capacity, maintain strong oversight and high standards of that entity's performance, we would see a more dramatic and sustained slope of improvement. And while other school- based investments would be necessary to scale up across the system, and some resource increases would be perpetual, some gains come quickly, are irreversible and do not need maintenance of effort investments.

In short, it is obvious from the story at Hope that money well spent, with the right kind of management and oversight, incentives and leadership is well worth it. This demands a rethinking of improvement funding strategies and priorities in terms of school funding.

Therefore, the state must:

- Invest in the district office so they can provide the support they aspire to and be held accountable for these functions. In particular: Insist on timely facilities improvements.
- Expect more and more of the city and district but not without continued support and resources especially in the areas of recreating the district office that is a true learning community rooted in continuous improvement practices.

'Conclusion: The Lessons Learned from Hope

Hope is a success story in progress. Its staff are public heroes. Its students are courageous partners in a positive renewal effort. Hope "partners" are an invaluable resource. Still, its families are not fully joined and the district is currently unable to meet the demands of overseeing such significant change activities without additional support.

The facility issues remain an embarrassment. The elevator took weeks to repair. The auditorium is being taken care of slowly. Technology work orders remain unattended to. Instruction is improving. Thematic approaches just emerging. The community is growing and a deeper sense of shared commitment, communication and respect is a priority. Risks have been taken and future risks must be made.

However, if more students are not in school more often the improvements will mean nothing for too many.

In summary the priorities can be simplified to:

- Engage parents through advisories a universal, high stakes expectation – by starting with those willing - to make sure they understand ILPs and get their children to school.
- Keep the professional learning focus on instruction by supporting Teacher Leaders and building thematic approaches that utilize the terrific higher education partnerships in place.
- Distribute leadership more fully and officially – retaining the authority of lead administrators – and institutionalizing cross complex decision-making structures.
- Develop a successful, serious peer-evaluation system and do it immediately.
- In terms of state policies, while the high school regulations are a good start, increased pressure to ensure personalization, literacy, differentiated instruction, multiple pathways to graduation, enhancement of community partnerships and the exploration of innovation in hiring practices will accelerate improvements. Being too patient carries the risk of mediocre results.
- Finally, the most volatile state level issues revolve around school funding and adequate support for school improvement. Urban settings such as Providence must be among the highest priorities when divining a fair and equitable system.